

respond to a few of the comments that I heard as I entered the Chamber with regard to Afghanistan.

The first is, nobody I know of in any way is denigrating the service of the men and women who served in Afghanistan for 20 years. They served honorably. They served well. They served bravely. They made great sacrifices, and some of them made the ultimate sacrifice. There is no dispute about that. But I think the question of the leaving of Afghanistan is worth a little bit of a broader discussion than what we just heard.

No. 1, the decision to leave Afghanistan was made by the Trump administration. Then-President Trump entered into an agreement in February of 2020 with the Taliban that we would leave by May 1 of 2021; all troops would be gone. I have read the agreement. In return, the Taliban said that they would not attack our troops. They also said they would enter into discussions with the Government of Afghanistan and try to effect a peaceful transfer of power. Of course, that didn't happen.

But I think it is very important for the American people to realize that the fundamental decision to leave Afghanistan was made almost a year before Joe Biden entered the Presidency. When Joe Biden entered the Presidency, he had a decision to make, and the decision was a very straightforward and very profound one. It was whether to honor the agreement that his predecessor had made and keep the word of the United States or whether to stay in Afghanistan, tear up that agreement, subject our people there to attacks by the Taliban, and then almost inevitably reescalate the conflict.

We were down—at the time of the agreement in February of 2020, there were something like 15,000 American troops. By the time President Biden came into office, there were only 2,500 American troops. If he had decided to stay, it wasn't a question of, we will just stay with our 2,500 troops; we would have been at war with the Taliban, and we would have inevitably—he, the President, Biden, would have inevitably been in a situation to increase our presence in Afghanistan once again after 20 years.

President Biden decided that our mission there was complete. The original mission, of course, was about Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida. And he decided that the American people were not prepared to commit to a war that essentially had no end. So that is point one.

Point two: There is no question that the leaving was chaotic and difficult and dangerous, but I think it is important to understand some of the surrounding circumstances. For example, I was one who stood on this floor in June and berated the administration for not moving aggressively enough to get those who helped our troops out.

The Presiding Officer, I think, took that position. Many of us took that position. We were hammering the admin-

istration. But then the President met with President Ghani on June 25 in person, and Ghani specifically said: Please don't start that evacuation in a major way because that in itself will lead to the collapse of our government; it will lead to a loss of confidence. So please don't do that.

So then the question became, when, if we withdrew our troops, would the Afghan Government fail? And we are going to be having hearings here this week, next week, the week after, to discuss that very question: What was the intelligence? I am a member of the Select Committee on Intelligence, and I can't talk about what I learned from the intelligence officials leading up to August of 2021. But the question is, Did the administration expect the Afghan Government to fall in a matter of days—8 days, I believe? I think clearly they did not. Should they? Was it a failure of intelligence? I don't believe so.

Intelligence is about data. It is about how many troops, how many guns? Who has the arms? Who holds what territory? The most difficult intelligence questions are psychological: Will the Afghan Army fight? Will they have the will to fight? Indeed, the Afghan security forces have fought for years and lost thousands. But when President Ghani fled the country, the government simply collapsed, and the Afghan security forces essentially said: Why should we fight if the government has gone?

I have heard it said that we left—I think my colleague from Wyoming said we left over 200 Americans or 150 trapped. A hundred or so have left in the last few days, left on a charter flight a couple of days ago. Yes, it is more difficult for them to get out, but the administration is working to get them out. The question is, Should the administration have stayed and triggered a possible conflict with the Taliban and attacks by terrorists, which did occur at the gate of the airport, versus the evacuation of everyone? And it was very difficult to determine, A, who these people were, and B, whether or not some of them wanted to leave. They were dual citizens. So that was a difficult decision.

My understanding is that the military advice to the President was that it was in America's interest to abide by the August 31 deadline and continue to work diplomatically to enable American citizens to leave. In fact, my understanding from public reports is the Taliban has essentially said: If you are an American citizen, if you have the paperwork, we will let you leave. So those people weren't trapped.

What bothers me about this conversation is the ignoring of the fact that 124,000 people were evacuated in 18 days, the largest airlift in history—124,000 people, including about 6,000 Americans, people from NATO, our NATO allies, and thousands of Afghans who were those people who assisted us.

Did we get them all out? I doubt it. But I can remember, as I am sure the

Presiding Officer can, earlier this year, we were talking about 18,000 of those SIVs. We got out 124,000 people. It was a logistical—it was an incredible logistical and diplomatic achievement.

There are plenty of questions left. There are questions to be answered. My problem is concluding that it was a disaster, concluding that the President did it all wrong, concluding and reaching conclusions without the facts. Let's have our hearings. Let's find out what actually happened. What was the intelligence? What did the administration know? What was the basis of the military advice to leave on August 31?

But also, part of the facts is what was achieved: 124,000 people who are now being housed and fed and vetted and treated for, examined for medical conditions. It is an amazing logistical achievement.

If you are talking about the armed services, let's talk about ready, aim, fire, not ready, fire, aim. Let's hold our fire until we understand what actually happened. I believe that is what we should do in this country responsibly rather than immediately going on the offensive and declaring the President incompetent and a disaster and should resign and all of those things.

We ought to understand what actually happened, and we will. That is our role. We should work through the process of gaining the facts before we draw the conclusions that I have heard drawn over the last week.

#### TRIBUTE TO TIM HUDSON

Madam President, let me change the subject. We have, throughout the Federal Government, wonderful people working for us. We have people working in all the Agencies. They work diligently; they work for many years; they work under difficult conditions; and they serve the American people. We speak of ourselves as public servants, but there are also public servants who are out there every day answering phone calls, doing the work of the government in whatever Agency, wherever they are, and they are doing important work.

I want to talk about one of them today just for a couple of minutes, a guy named Tim Hudson. Tim's mustache is a lot better than mine. Tim Hudson is retiring this week after 54 years with the National Park Service—54 years with the National Park Service. That is dedication to the public service. He has served in Alaska. He has served at Yellowstone. He came East after Superstorm Sandy to supervise the reconstruction and maintenance of national parks in the East. He is an expert on maintenance, on keeping these places up to speed, up to snuff, so that our citizens can enjoy them.

He came out of retirement or he slowed his retirement to do his last 5 years in the State of Maine. President Obama created Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument, a spectacular spot in the middle of the North Woods of Maine. It was somewhat controversial at the time. I spent days up

there in public meetings and took a lot of flak and listened to a lot of contrary opinions, some much positive, some negative.

When he created the national monument, the question was, OK, who is going to get it going? Who is going to make it happen? And Tim Hudson answered the call. He spent the last 5 years up there working with the local community. He has done a huge amount of work with the local community to give them confidence in what the Park Service is doing. He has worked with the people, the Friends of Katahdin Woods and Waters. He has worked with the people who are helping to develop this wonderful facility for more and more people every year. I think this year, the visitation will be 35, 40, or 55,000 people. It is a spectacular spot.

Tim Hudson started from scratch. I just want to recognize Tim and the thousands like him throughout this country who work on our behalf quietly every day without a Senator making a speech about them, but they go about their work on behalf of the American people. I just didn't want Tim Hudson's retirement to go unremarked because not only does he deserve recognition, so many of his colleagues, whether it is in the Park Service, the Department of Agricultural, the Department of Defense, the Department of Commerce, the Internal Revenue Service, all the people who work on behalf of this country, the brave men and women in the Department of State who work around the world, often in dangerous situations—we need to recognize them. We need to support them. We need to let them know that we know what they are doing and that we care what they are doing.

That is why I am here today to talk about Tim Hudson, a guy who has made a difference for this country for 54 years, and he has made a huge difference for the people of Maine over the past 5 years.

I want to say thanks to Tim and his wife Mary and wish him the best in his retirement. He is the best of what America is all about. He has served us well and he has served the people of Maine well and I appreciate it and thank him for it.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Tennessee.

#### AFGHANISTAN

Mrs. BLACKBURN. Madam President, September 11, 2001, is a date that is seared in the memories of those of us who lived through that day and experienced the trauma and the fear of that day.

What has always struck me about that day and the days following, even standing here 20 years later, is how the entire free world stood united against what we saw as a common threat. It came to us as naturally as breathing. We understood that as witnesses to mass murder, we shared a duty to avenge those who had died. It may

have been fear that forced us together, but in the days that followed the attacks, we, as Americans, rediscovered the ties that have bound us for centuries and solidified our faith in the common cause of freedom.

But the more time that passes between each September 11 and the September 11 attacks, the more obvious it becomes that history slips away from those who fail to heed its lessons. The defensive action we took as a nation in the wake of the attacks was among the most forceful and effective the world had ever seen, but still, even 20 years later, it is obvious that our work in Afghanistan and the Middle East is far from over.

My colleague from Maine talked about the withdrawal from Afghanistan. I would say, as I talk to Tennesseans, it is not withdrawing from Afghanistan; it was the manner in which the Biden administration chose to end the military mission in Afghanistan that didn't seem to reflect the reality of what was going on on the ground.

Last week, I sent a letter to Chairman REED, with several of my colleagues on the Armed Services Committee, asking for formal hearings on the withdrawal. We need to know exactly what happened, how they were advised. Without sworn testimony from Secretary Austin, General Milley, General McKenzie, and General Miller, we will never be able to untangle the chaotic course of events that led to the deaths of 13 servicemembers in Kabul and the abandonment of an unknown number of American citizens and our Afghan partners.

Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the letter be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD as follows:

U.S. SENATE,  
September 8, 2021.

Senator JACK REED,  
Chairman, Senate Armed Services Committee,  
Washington, DC.

CHAIRMAN REED: It is necessary and appropriate for Congress to examine the manner in which our military mission ended in Afghanistan. We should do so with transparency, candor, and a dedication to ascertaining the facts without regard to politics.

We understand that in the coming months, many committees will claim the authority to ask questions regarding our military's withdrawal. Yet, because our committee bears the special responsibility of authorizing and overseeing America's armed forces, we acutely feel the obligation to seek answers. The American people, and in particular many of those who serve our country in uniform, are hurting, angry, and disappointed. We owe them a clear and comprehensive understanding of what happened, why, and how best to learn from these events for the future. Time is of the essence. These hearings should be our top priority when the Senate reconvenes.

We write to formally request that the Senate Armed Services Committee fully exercise its oversight authority by holding both opened and closed hearings on this matter and that our committee ask the Department

of Defense to preserve any and all records pertaining to the conclusion of our operations in Afghanistan. In particular, we seek sworn testimony from Secretary Lloyd Austin, General Mark Milley, General Frank McKenzie, Jr., and General A. Scott Miller.

We owe it to our nation, those who served, their families, and our allies and partners who fought alongside us, to preserve the records of how our fight in Afghanistan concluded. The insights we gather will help prevent future loss of American blood and treasure, a solemn responsibility and sacred trust we believe all members of our committee will seek to uphold.

Sincerely,

Tommy Tuberville, Roger Wicker, Tom Cotton, Joni K. Ernst, Thom Tillis, Dan Sullivan, Kevin Cramer, Rick Scott, Marsha Blackburn, Josh Hawley, U.S. Senators.

Mrs. BLACKBURN. Beyond the fact-finding mission, I plan to use these hearings to impress upon my Democratic colleagues the importance of the words that we use to describe our enemies, how we talk about them, how we frame their actions.

Since day one—since day one of this administration—the Biden administration has used their words to rehabilitate the Taliban in the eyes of their radical base. The problem, of course, is that their diplomatic calls for inclusivity and equality, this supports a lie about who the Taliban actually is. The Taliban—like ISIS, like al-Qaida—is a terrorist organization. They rule by fear. They rule through public beatings, rape, forced marriage, brutality against anyone who questions their regime, against anyone who disagrees with them. Look at the way women and children are treated.

Now, in my opinion and from a lot of Tennesseans whom I have talked with as I have been home, they feel that expecting terrorists to behave like normal people is reckless and stupid. And they feel that some of the actions that have come from this administration and comments that they would have that expectation would reflect that reckless stupidity. These are terrorist organizations.

If you need another example of this, just look at their approach to border security. Even before the transfer of power, massive migrant caravans had begun moving out of Central America and toward the southern border. They were eager to take advantage of then-Candidate Biden's promises of open borders and amnesty for all.

Where did that get us? Well, this is what we have learned. The CBP reports that migrant encounters along the U.S.-Mexico border reached a 20-year high in July. That is right, massive numbers. They heard those promises. So what did they do? They got to work contacting a cartel, and they made this journey after, of course, they paid the cartel. Most of the nearly 200,000 people our Border Patrol caught in July were traveling alone. Families might be holding back, but the international traffickers certainly are not holding back.

On August 29, CBP officers in Memphis found three kilograms of